“Not From Where You’re Standing”

from *The Toastmaster*

by Isabel Gibson

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Tall – that’s what you notice first. Then his gait grabs you – he walks like a runway model. Head up and half-smiling, sure of his right-of-way. In a trench coat and black shirt, jeans and boots, he’d be at home on Vancouver’s streets at 2:00 a.m. At 2:00 p.m., he makes airport security guards stand a little taller themselves. But appearances are deceiving – he’s not a security threat, he’s just young. Young enough to risk being a smart aleck with a stranger he needs something from.

Not knowing what she’s getting into, the airline agent glances up at him – looks again. Looking down at the screen, she asks about photo identification. A standard request, a non-standard response.

“Do you have any photo ID?”

“Yes.” Then silence.

She looks up, puzzled. He isn’t moving. Not reaching into a back pocket or inside that preposterous coat for a wallet. The inaction joins the silence, piling up between them.

“May I see it?” A tad impatient.

“I have no objection.” Very pleasant.

Another pause, as she processes her options.

“Can I see it?” A little sharper.

“Not from where you’re standing.” Perfectly polite, perfectly precise. Merely informing.

“Show it to me!” OK – now she’s annoyed.

“Certainly.” As he reaches for his wallet, happy to oblige the implied-request-turned-explicit-demand, the rest is left unsaid, “Why didn’t you ask?”

Not a standard exchange. Even occasional fliers know the security staff is not conducting a survey: They want to see your photo ID and they will see it. Asking the wrong questions seem more polite than giving an instruction - “Show me your photo ID.” It seems more efficient than asking a chain of questions. Usually, the shorthand form works fine.

How often do we hear shorthand questions and respond not to what was said, but to what we think was meant? The cashier asks if we have two pennies and we surrender them without comment, simplifying our change. The hotel clerk asks if we know our license plate number, and we recite it. The Alabama-based call center operator asks if we can spell that odd Canadian city name, and we do. Someone on the streets asks if we know where a certain store is, and we launch into directions. The waiter asks if we’ve had time to make a choice, and we give him our order without further prompting.

Usually we’re right. We understand the intent of these questions and respond appropriately. But as all aspects of our lives speed up, perhaps we’re a little quicker to use the shorthand forms in what we say, not just with service people in standard transactions, but with people we work or live with. And so it happens that we sometimes have trouble getting our questions heard, much less answered. Listeners think they know where they’re going, what we mean. All those steps that involve listening and waiting.

We stop listening – to others and to ourselves. As responders, we believe that we have heard the direct question. Only rarely does someone respond precisely to the question actually asked.

“Do you have any photo ID?”

“Yes.”

As askers, we believe that we have asked the direct question. Like the airline agent, we react with impatience when someone doesn’t respond as we expected. When they play a different game with us.

“Can I see it?”

“Not from where you’re standing.”

Maybe communication isn’t an art. Maybe it’s a game – cooperative or competitive, touch or full contact, depending on the circumstances and the players. Like any game, it’s hard to learn just by reading the rules. You have to play.

Its safest playing with people you know, people who won’t be too startled or irritated when you violate the accepted shorthand forms. But sometimes, like the young man at the airport, I like to surprise someone. I choose wisely; I never play with people who carry guns. But there are many potential partners out there, signaling in various ways their readiness to play.

Reading a book while waiting in line outside a popular brunch place on Calgary’s 17th Avenue, I look up to see a young woman in front of me. As a middle-aged woman, I look like a safe choice.

“Do you know what time it is?” she asks.

I flashback to an episode of “The West Wing.” The White House counsel is prepping the press secretary for her testimony.

“Do you know what time it is?” he asks. She checks her watch and tells him the time. Impatiently.

He says, “I wish you’d stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” Even more impatiently.

“Answering more than I asked,” he says. There’s a tense pause. He says again, “Do you know what time it is?”

She stares at him long enough to be rude. “Yes.” Flatly.

I look up from my watch. The young woman is waiting for my answer to her question.

“Do you know what time it is?”

I could just tell her the time. I could say, “Yes” and stop. Instead, I choose the middle course.

“Yes.” I smile. “Would you like to know too?”

Let the games begin.